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New London becoming a popular cruise ship stop; tops other ports in catering to passengers and crew

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The sun rose right around 5:30 a.m. on Saturday September 1st and the question that drifted in my mind was, "Was the ship so large that it would block out the low rising sun as it passed?" Shortly before 6 that morning I was pedaling my vintage 1970s Raleigh Grand Prix down Montauk Ave. to Pequot Ave. and along the shorefront beaches to the southern point of New London at Ocean Beach Park. It was there that I hoped to see it as it made its way through The Race, pass New London Ledge Lighthouse and into the Thames River. The normally unanticipated sightseers were starting to gather along the shore roads picking out their viewing spots with cameras and binoculars in hand. It was an absolutely gorgeous morning; not a cloud in the sky with the deep dark blues of the west softening to the lighter pastels of the east. I parked myself at the eastern shore of Ocean Beach and got my first glimpse of her as she commandingly cruised through Long Island Sound and approached Ledge Light. "She" was Royal Caribbean International's cruise ship, m/s Explorer of the Seas. And at 138,000 tons, 1,020 ft. long and more than 14 stories above the waterline she was the largest ship to ever enter the Thames River. She made a huge and grand impression upon the shimmering seas.

The ship passed by Neptune Beach Point and that was my cue to ride back along Pequot Ave. to my next stop, Fort Trumbull State Park. It was directly in front of the park that Explorer of the Seas was going to do a seemingly tricky 180 degree maneuver allowing her to back into the berth at the Admiral Harold E. Shear State Pier. By this time at 6:30 in the morning the scenic shore road was jammed with people and cars all out to witness this historic event.

Explorer of the Seas, carrying more than 4,000 passengers and crew, was the biggest ship to stop at the Port of New London. But it wasn't the first cruise ship to land here. Way back when, New London had been a stop for passenger ships traveling between New London and New York City. In recent years the 49 passenger American Glory and American Eagle of the American Cruise Lines used to regularly embark from the Custom House Pier at the Waterfront Park for their New England Islands cruises. The first large cruise ship came to New London in 2002; it was the 612 ft. long, nearly 1500 passenger and crew, m/s Regal Empress. She easily berthed at the State Pier and may have been partially responsible for drawing the attention of the other major cruise lines. It was in 2004 with the first visit of Holland America Line's m/s Maasdam that things really started to take off. Prior to Explorer of the Seas, the smaller Maasdam at 720 ft. and close to 1800 passengers and crew was the largest passenger ship to call at New London.

The interest of the cruise line operators in the Port of New London also tweaked the interest of the then organized Connecticut Maritime Coalition, the Department of Economic and Community Development, and a few local cruisers particularly, George and Mary-Jane Cassidy and Joyce Resnikoff who were instrumental in organizing and maintaining the Connecticut Cruise Ship Task

Force. It was this Cruise Ship Task Force that brought the highest level of cruise ships to New London. Despite a less than rosy picture painted by a DECD sponsored 2004 report on the economic impact analysis of a single cruise ship visit to New London, the Task Force weathered some rough seas and demonstrated that Maasdam was not to be 'one ship passing in the night'. This year there were seven port-calls, four by Explorer of the Seas, bringing in some 22,000 passengers and crew. The majority of passengers visited historic downtown New London via city sponsored tour-guided shuttle buses. Other bus excursions went to Mystic Seaport, Mystic Aquarium and Village, Essex, Newport, and the submarine Nautilus Museum in Groton. Best Buy provided a free bus shuttle for the crew to go to their store and the malls. It was a major cooperative effort organized by the Cruise Ship Task Force, the City of New London and several other organizations. For each visit it was not unusual to have more than 100 volunteers working in shifts to assist, welcome, and inform the passengers. The feedback from the cruise lines and the passengers was that New London topped all other ports on the itinerary in catering to the passengers and crew. It was clear the New London experience was making an impression; next year eight port-calls are scheduled.

The task during the winter will be to assess the economic impact of this year's cruise ship visits. The City of New London and Mitchell College are jointly working on developing a business impact study. Ongoing meetings of the Task Force and other stakeholder groups are examining ways to determine the overall economic impact measuring positive returns versus operational expenses. Chances are the data will be collected for another full year before a definitive assessment will be concluded.

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